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COMPARATIVE ANALYSES OF SOCIETAL STRUCTURE USING OVER-TIME CENSUS DATA*

In the Federal Republic of Germany the empirical study of the internal structure of advanced societies and their changes in time has been limited to the two sources of data traditionally employed: small sample opinion polls and published tabular material from censuses and other social statistics by state agencies for their own purposes. Each of these data sources has imposed its own set of restrictions on structural analysis. Surveys based on small representative samples have tended to concentrate on individuals as the units of analysis, on the overall associations between background variables and attitudes and on cross-sectional ahistorical representations of structures in a limited number of problem areas. The wealth of data provided by censuses and other mass surveys, on the other hand, has been used less and less, since their classifications and aggregations often do not correspond to the researchers' purpose and the published distributions seldom make provision for the now standard multivariate techniques of data analysis.

The central aim of the VASMA project (=Vergleichende Analysen der Sozialstruktur mit Massendaten) is to establish for the wider use of the Social Sciences in the Federal Republic of Germany the methodological and technical infrastructure for the secondary analysis of 'mass data' from state statistical offices, similar to what has existed for some years in Anglo-Saxon countries. We use the term 'mass data' for the very large datasets primarily produced in official censuses, whether they be records of a large number of individual respondents in the case of more recent censuses (micro-data) or aggregate results from the very detailed tabulations of earlier censuses. On this basis the project aims to advance the empirical investigation of societal structure in four directions. In contrast to the area-specific interests of survey research and descriptive social statistics we shall study topics which relate to several institutional domains and spheres of life. In contrast to the predominant cross-sectional representation of societal structure, we shall deal primarily with problems in which time dimensions - life time and historical time - play a crucial role. We shall also move beyond the level of individuals as units of analysis to the levels of households and families, organisations and regions. And finally we shall explore a comparative perspective in selected problem areas on the basis of both historical and cross-national comparisons of the Federal Republic with a few other advanced societies.

Specifically, the research tasks relate to three functions:

I. The development of a technical infrastructure for the retrieval and analysis of large datasets. This work will build on a software system which has proved highly successful in current analyses of data from 1% microcensus 1971 'Occupational and social mobility of the population'.

II. The acquisition, preparation and documentation of sources of official data for the analysis of societal structure. The project plans to make accessible and operable for secondary analysis by

scientists the microdata of the 1980 census, of selected microcensuses and microcensus supplements since 1957 as well as of other large-scale official surveys for the Federal Republic of Germany (e.g. surveys of income and consumption and of work places). For the more distant past of the Federal Republic and the German Reich the project proposes to transfer to data tapes the most important published tables from the series of occupation censuses (1882-1961), which document in great detail (with up to 100.000 cells per table) the development of the occupational structure. For comparative purposes the project aims to complement this database with a few selected sets of comparable microdata for France (INSEE enquête, 1973), the United Kingdom (General Household Surveys, Nuffield Mobility Surveys for England and Wales, 1972), and the US (Current Population Survey and 'Occupational Change in one Generation' supplement, 1973). The software developments and - so far as legal restrictions allow - the datasets will be made available for the wider social science community and the project will thus make a general contribution to basic macrosociological research.

III. The bulk of the research work will consist of empirical studies on a set of interrelated problems selected on the basis of their essential interest and exemplary character in demonstrating the 'quantum-leap', deriving from the use of large scale microdata in macrosociological research:

a) Cohort differentiation and structural change. Using retrospective data and time-series from cross-sectional census data the project aims to show how historical events and processes impinge upon the life cycles of various birth cohorts and how structural change is coming about via a succession of cohorts. The objective is to reconstruct a differentiated social history of the recent past avoiding whenever possible the pure consideration of often misleading aggregate trends.

b) Life cycles, life courses and age stratification. As a further element in a 'diachronic' analysis of social structure the patterns and sequences of positions held by individuals and families will be one major focus of research. Within this context the educational, familial and occupational 'careers' of women will receive special attention.

c) Transformation of the occupational structure. Changes in the occupational structure represent a crucial factor for the opportunities of successive cohorts and - in conjunction with changes in the educational system - for the structure of life cycles. They are, however, for Germany at least only rudimentarily described and analysed. In contrast to the crude shifts in employment according to sector and employment status changes in occupational activities have only received scant attention. The preparation of aggregate data for flexible data analysis from past occupational censuses will make a more differentiated analysis of this crucial transformation possible. Recent census and microcensus data for the Federal Republic will be used to map ongoing processes in the occupational structure.

d) Patterns of social mobility and status allocation - international comparisons. The VASMA project succeeds a large series of national

investigations on social mobility and status attainment including our own study on the Federal Republic. Within the framework of the project we shall participate in the ongoing international comparisons of these data-sets.

e) Regional differentiation. The prevalent national unit of structural analysis might be as prone to 'false averages' as cross-sections of cohorts and age groups. The availability of microdata will make it possible to introduce the regional breakdowns for the purpose of demonstrating discrepancies in conditions and opportunities.

f) Organizations: enterprises and work places. Whereas theoretically it is an acknowledged fact that individuals and households only comprise one aspect of societal structure, national investigations at the organisational level are rare. The VASMA project will at a later stage make an attempt to explore this area empirically by using data from censuses of work places (Arbeitsstättenzählungen), in which enterprises as well as their local branches serve as the units of enumeration.

The VASMA project is to be carried out by sociologists of the University of Mannheim (Walter Bach, Johann Handl, Wolfgang Kleber, Nelleke Lijphart, Karl Ulrich Mayer, Walter Müller, Angelika Willms and Wolfgang Zapf) in close cooperation with the Federal Institute for Population Research in Wiesbaden (Wolfgang Lengsfeld, Ulrich Mamme, Gerd-Rüdiger Rückert and Wolfgang Schwartz). It is financed by a generous grant of the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk Hannover.

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